

APPEARED
IN SECTION 1

CHICAGO TRIBUNE
6 February 1986

Shcharansky release rumors gain speed

By Thom Shanker
Chicago Tribune

MOSCOW—Jewish activist or enemy of the state? Friend to foreign journalists or spy for the CIA? Guilty of treason, subversion, anti-Soviet agitation or a prisoner of conscience?

In the case of Anatoly Shcharansky, to define the terms of debate is to predetermine the outcome of the argument.

Thus the unemployed computer programmer, who said he only wanted a one-way ticket to Israel and who led other Soviet Jews fighting for the same, became a symbol of the battle for human rights in the Soviet Union.

Rumors of his release from a Ural Mountains labor camp as part of an East-West spy swap appear to be gaining credence.

In Bonn, Chancellor Helmut Kohl confirmed Tuesday that a swap was in the works. In Berlin, the East German Foreign Ministry said it would come early next week. Neither confirmed that Shcharansky was part of the deal.

If true, the deal for Shcharansky's freedom underscores yet again the troubling questions and ironies surrounding his 1977 arrest and his trial and sentencing the following year.

"The allegation that Shcharansky was a spy for the United States is patently false," an outraged President Jimmy Carter said on July 11, 1978, of Shcharansky's 13-year sentence. "The Soviets know it to be false."

Shcharansky, now 38, was charged with giving the West "classified data on the location, staffing and role of a large number of defense-industry installations."

His spymaster was identified in court as Robert C. Toth, Moscow correspondent for the Los Angeles Times, accused by Soviet authorities of being a U.S. secret agent. Toth is currently with the paper's bureau in Washington.

Shcharansky, who speaks excellent English, had served as spokesman and translator for a number of "refuseniks," those Soviet Jews whose requests for emigration are denied. He helped them tell their stories to Western correspondents.

"There was no secret information provided to me by Mr. Shcharansky," Toth wrote after his departure from Moscow.

"And even under Soviet rules of what is secret information—traffic statistics, salaries of athletes, all information not officially released—there is no basis in my experience with him to support conviction for espionage."

The accusations underscored the Soviet government's ambivalent relationship with Western correspondents, trained in adversarial techniques which are the foundation of a free press.

While the Kremlin is keenly interested in disseminating its views, foreign reporters who attempt to delve deeper, or unofficially, into Soviet affairs lay themselves open to charges of espionage.

In the end, Toth was subjected to four rounds of interrogation before he signed a transcript whose veracity he could not verify because it was in Russian.

That signed statement played a central role in Shcharansky's trial.

Western envoys and members of Moscow's refusenik community voiced concern this week that Shcharansky's release as part of a spy swap would seen as an admission of guilt. Several claiming detailed knowledge of the Shcharansky case said he once before declined an offer of release unless he got an unconditional pardon.

By freeing him now, the Kremlin would stand to gain substantial public relations ground before the next superpower summit. Moreover, Shcharansky's health is failing as a result of his imprisonment and a long hunger strike he held to protest its harsh conditions.

The release could still be derailed. The West German newspaper Bild, which first broke the news of the impending swap on Sunday, reported Tuesday that the Soviets had made a "completely unexpected" demand of \$2 million for Shcharansky.

Shcharansky, born Jan. 20, 1948, to a Ukrainian Communist Party member, was trained at the Moscow Physical-Technical Institute, where he became interested in Jewish affairs. After graduation, he applied to emigrate to Israel. Permission was denied on the grounds that his work at a gas and oil research institute gave him access to state secrets. Like other refuseniks, he promptly lost his job.

In the mid-1970s, Shcharansky was close to other prominent dissidents such as Nobel Peace Prize laureate Andrei Sakharov, now banished to Gorky; Alexander Ginzburg, freed in a 1979 prisoner exchange with the U.S.; and Yuri Orlov, founder of the group set up to monitor Soviet compliance with the Helsinki accords. Orlov, too, is in internal exile.

In 1974 Shcharansky married Natalia Stiglitz, who took his last name and changed her first name to the Hebrew Avital. Twelve hours after the wedding, Avital Shcharansky left for Israel on a Soviet exit visa. Now based in Jerusalem, she travels widely in an effort to secure her husband's freedom and promote the refuseniks' cause.

A spokesman for Avital Shcharansky, who has not seen her husband in nearly 12 years, said in Jerusalem Tuesday that she remains skeptical of the reports that Anatoly is soon to be freed.